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WOMEN IN THE LABOUR FORCE "LABOUR UNIONS"

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The Women's Bureau Ontario Ministry of Labour

PREAMBLE

Women throughout the world have been involved in labour unions for many years. When considering the topic of women in the paid workforce, it is essential to include an assessment of their role in organized labour. This fact sheet outlines in some detail the union activity of Canadian women. Particular emphasis is given to the women of Ontario as union participants.⁽¹⁾

I. CANADA

The number of women in the Canadian labour force increased dramatically between 1965 and 1975 from 2,066,000 to 3,697,000, a rise of 79%.⁽²⁾ In the same years there was a 30% increase in the size of the male workforce. In 1965, 29.1% of all workers were women, but by 1975, this had increased to 36.7%. Union activity of Canadian women has risen even more dramatically.

TABLE ONE

Labour Union Membership by Sex, Canada

| Union members | 1965 | 1975 | % increase 1965 to 1975 |
|---------------|-----------|-----------|-------------------------|
| male | 1,469,594 | 2,025,164 | 38% |
| female | 292,056 | 711,102 | 144% |
| TOTAL | 1,761,650 | 2,736,266 | 55% |

One quarter of all unionized workers in 1975 were women. In ten years, the number of women belonging to labour unions had increased by 144%.

As shown below, women were joining both the labour force and trade unions much more rapidly than their male counterparts. Their higher rate of unionization was more than a reflection of their increased workforce participation, however. The rise in union membership was 144%, contrasted with a 79% rise in the female labour force.

TABLE TWO

Changes in Labour Force and Union Activity
Canada 1965 - 1975

| Increase 1965-75 | women | men |
|------------------|-------|-----|
| Labour force | 79% | 30% |
| Union membership | 144% | 38% |

DEPOSITORY LIBRARY MATERIAL

The more rapid rate of unionization for women can in part be explained by the expansion of the tertiary or service-oriented sector of the economy where recent union organization has been focussed. The primary and heavy manufacturing industries, employing a large proportion of males, were already well organized. Increased organization in service and white collar industries, which typically employ large numbers of women, can only result in an increase in the number and proportion of women union members. The unionization of government employees has particularly expanded the ranks of women union members.

Although the figures demonstrate a rapid increase in union membership of women, it is essential to consider what proportion of Canadian workers — both male and female — are unionized.

Women's share of total union membership increased from 16.6% in 1965 to 26% in 1975. However, their representation was still markedly lower than their share of the total workforce. In 1975, slightly more than one out of every three workers was a woman but only one out of every four union members was female.

The majority of Canadian workers do not belong to a union and proportionately fewer women than men are unionized.

TABLE THREE

Union members as a Percentage of the Workforce,
by sex, Canada, 1975

| | male | female | total |
|---------------|-----------|-----------|------------|
| labour force | 6,363,000 | 3,697,000 | 10,060,000 |
| union members | 2,025,164 | 711,102 | 2,736,266 |
| % unionized | 31.8% | 19.2% | 27.2% |

Although the figures given above demonstrate an increase in unionization since 1965 (when 29.2% of male workers and 14.1% of female workers were unionized), the fact remains that less than 30% of Canadian workers are organized.

II. ONTARIO

Examination of statistics for Ontario show that here also there have been changes in both the participation of women in the labour force and their degree of unionization.

Ontario's female workforce has tripled in the past two decades. Their share of the total labour force has increased from 30% in 1965 to 38% in 1975.

TABLE FOUR

Women in the Labour Force, Ontario

| Year | Number of women working | women as % total labour force |
|------|-------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1965 | 798,000 | 30% |
| 1975 | 1,480,000 | 38% |

As was noted for Canada as a whole, the increase in the number of women working has been matched with a corresponding rise in union membership.

TABLE FIVE

Labour Union Membership by Sex, Ontario

| Union members | 1965 | 1975 | % increase 1965 to 1975 |
|---------------|---------|-----------|-------------------------|
| male | 616,110 | 779,941 | 26.6% |
| female | 111,485 | 231,722 | 107.9% |
| Total | 727,595 | 1,011,663 | 39% |

Although the 107.9% rise in female union membership in ten years is substantial, the comparable figure for Canada is 144%. The rate of unionization in Ontario has been slower than for the rest of the country for both men and women.

In ten years there was a 1.7% increase in union participation for Ontario women, contrasted with a 5.1% increase for Canadian women.

TABLE SIX

% Working Women Unionized by Area

| Year | Canada | Ontario |
|------|--------|---------|
| 1965 | 14.1% | 14.0% |
| 1975 | 19.2% | 15.7% |

The effect of women's membership on union activities must in part reflect their share of total union enrolment. As with any organization, a group must be a visible force if they are to influence the decision making process. In Ontario in 1965, women made up 15.3% of total union membership. By 1975, this figure had risen to 22.9%. Slightly more than one of every five union members in Ontario was a woman.

III. TO WHAT UNIONS DO WOMEN BELONG?

In 1975 in Ontario, just over half of all women union members belonged to locals of international labour

organizations (See Table 7). This represented a marked decrease from the 1965 figure. 50.7% were in international unions, 25.9% in national unions and 23.4% in government employees' organizations. It should be noted, however, that women made up a larger proportion of members in national unions (34.5%) and government organizations (35.0%) than in international unions (17.2%). This is partly because the two former groups tend to represent white collar and service industries whereas the international unions tend to be involved in the traditionally male field of heavy industry.

TABLE SEVEN

Female Union Membership by Type of Labour Organization, Ontario, 1965 & 1975

| | 1965 | | 1975 | | Women as % Total Membership | |
|------------------------------------|---------|-------|---------|-------|-----------------------------|-------|
| | No. # | % | No. # | % | 1965 | 1975 |
| International | 65,163 | 58.5% | 117,600 | 50.7% | 11.7% | 17.2% |
| National | 26,574 | 23.8% | 59,909 | 25.9% | 29.8% | 34.5% |
| Government Employees Organizations | 19,748 | 17.7% | 54,213 | 23.4% | 24.5% | 35.0% |
| All Labour Organizations | 111,485 | 100% | 231,722 | 100% | 15.3% | 22.9% |

Examination of female union participation by industry reveals a low degree of organization in industries with high proportions of female employees.

TABLE EIGHT

Female Paid Workers by Industrial Distribution & Union Membership — Canada, 1975

| Industry | % of workers who are women | % of women unionized |
|------------------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------|
| Services | 59% | 19.6% |
| Finance, Insurance and Real Estate | 57% | 2.8% |
| Trade | 39% | 6.4% |
| Public Administration | 32% | 63.3% |
| Manufacturing | 24% | 35.3% |
| Transportation & Communications | 18% | 46.0% |
| Total* all industries | 36% | 20.9% |

*includes agriculture, construction, forestry, fishing, trapping and primary industries with very few women workers.

Industries with the highest percentage of female workers are services (59%), Finance, Insurance and Real Estate (57%) and Trade (39%). These three categories also have the lowest rates of unionization among women employees (19.6%, 2.8% and 6.4% respectively). Men who work in these industries also have a low level of union activity. Conversely, the

industries with low female participation show a higher degree of union organization.

Most Canadian women belong to unions with a predominantly male membership. Although there has been some change in this regard since 1965, the overall picture has remained the same.

TABLE NINE

Reporting Labour Organizations by
Proportion of Women Members — Canada

| Percentage of women members in union | Percentage of women in this category of union | |
|--------------------------------------|---|-------|
| | 1965 | 1975 |
| no women | — | — |
| Less than 10% | 10.2% | 5.7% |
| 10% - 29.9% | 22.3% | 14.9% |
| 30% - 49.9% | 34.6% | 38.5% |
| 50% - 69.9% | 19.1% | 26.7% |
| 70% - 89.9% | 7.8% | 8.3% |
| 90% - 99.9% | 5.9% | 5.9% |
| all women | — | — |
| Total | 100% | 100% |

In 1965, 67.1% of women union members were in organizations with a majority of male members. By 1975, only 59.1% were in this category.

Women's union membership has been concentrated into a few organizations. In 1975, the following labour organizations reported 15,000 or more women members:

Canadian Union of Public Employees — 86,521 (39.8%*)
Quebec Teachers Corporation — 54,483 (65.4%*)
Public Service Alliance of Canada — 51,217 (35.8%*)
Service Employees International Union — 34,990 (68.1%*)
Social Affairs Federation — 33,666 (68.2%*)
Ontario Public Service Employees Union — 26,658 (47.5%*)
Retail Clerks International Association — 19,702 (45.5%*)
Amalgamated Meat Cutters & Butcher Workmen of North America — 19,666 (34.7%*)
International Ladies Garment Workers Union — 19,521
Registered Nurses Association of British Columbia — 17,913

*percentage women members

Women are not represented on the executive boards of Canadian unions in proportion to their overall union membership. The Royal Commission on the Status of Women drew attention to this in its report in 1970. As shown in Table Ten, national unions have the highest percentage of women board members with 13.7%.

TABLE TEN

Women Executive Board Members as Percentage of Total Executive Board Members, by Type of Union, Canada 1974

| Type of Union | Total Executive Board Members | Women Executive Board Members | Women as % Total |
|----------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|------------------|
| International* | 170 | 5 | 2.9% |
| National | 417 | 57 | 13.7% |
| Government | 352 | 19 | 5.4% |
| Total | 939 | 81 | 8.6% |

*figures relate to Canadian board members only

IV. WOMEN AND UNION ACTIVITIES

Many reasons have been advanced explaining why women do not join and/or actively participate in labour organizations.

Problem areas identified below have been put forward both in the literature and in conferences and seminars involving union women. None of the barriers are dealt with in detail. It should also be noted that all women are not influenced by these suggested barriers to participation.

1. Lack of time for union activities. Many married women work in their job all day and do housework at night. They have 2 jobs.
2. Lack of encouragement from husband and other family members.
3. Babysitting problems for night meetings.
4. Fear of going out alone at night.
5. Not accustomed to competing with male colleagues.
6. Experience and self-confidence gap of some women returning to work after years at home.
7. Lack of encouragement from fellow workers to actively participate.
8. Lack of women as role models in leadership positions.
9. Stereotyping of women to secretarial/support jobs within unions.

Some of the barriers listed above are more readily dealt with than others. The problems of babysitting and transportation for evening meetings can be solved through the provisions of temporary child care facilities and car pools. One group of workers in British Columbia solved this problem in another way. The Service, Office and Retail Workers Union is a small and relatively new union formed by women. In the first contract they negotiated, they included a clause stating that once a month the lunch break would be 2 hours long and the extra hour would be for a union meeting. They now have a 90% attendance at these meetings.

Other barriers, particularly those concerned with the low self esteem of women, are more complex. These must be overcome in different ways. Many unions are now examining their policies and inviting

comments from members concerning the status of women. By identifying the self perceived barriers to full participation by women, means of eliminating the problems can be developed.

V. IN SUMMARY, WHAT CAN WE SAY ABOUT WOMEN AND UNIONS IN ONTARIO:

- 38% of Ontario workers are women
- 15.7% of them are unionized
- there has been a 107.9% rise in labour union members of Ontario women in 10 years
- 22.9% of union members are women
- the majority of women are in international unions
- women have their best representation as a group in national unions or government organizations
- industries with the highest percentage of female workers have the lowest rate of unionization
- most women belong to unions with a predominantly male membership and executive board.

Footnotes

- (1) All statistical data given here draws on information filed for the years 1965 and 1975 under the Corporations & Labour Unions Returns Act. The report for 1965 is based on 172 unions represent-

ing 8,543 locals. For 1975, 177 labour organizations reported on 11,536 locals. All changes noted will be for the ten years 1965-1975. More recent changes in women's union activity must be considered in conjunction with material presented here.

- (2) The Revision of the Labour Force Survey in 1975 makes strict comparability between 1965 and 1975 impossible.

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